Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

With Contributions by:

Greg Goodwin

To subscribe to A-ONE, change e-mail addresses, or unsubscribe,
log on to our website at: www.atarinews.org
and click on "Subscriptions".
OR subscribe to A-ONE by sending a message to: dpj@atarinews.org
and your address will be added to the distribution list.
To unsubscribe from A-ONE, send the following: Unsubscribe A-ONE
Please make sure that you include the same address that you used to
subscribe from.

To download A-ONE, set your browser bookmarks to one of the
following sites:

http://people.delphiforums.com/dpj/a-one.htm
Now available:
http://www.atarinews.org

Visit the Atari Advantage Forum on Delphi!
http://forums.delphiforums.com/atari/

=~=~=~=

A-ONE #0912 03/23/07

~ 'Search Spam' Exposed! ~ People Are Talking! ~ 'Wiki' Goes Legit!
~ New Atari BBS Gateway! ~ Porn Law Struck Down! ~ MIT Courses Online!

~ Internet Names Privacy ~ Virus Writers Team Up! ~ Google Suit Tossed!
~ MySpace Goes Politics! ~ Fortran Pioneer Dies! ~ "xxx" Domain Vote?

-* Clinton and Obama Video War! *-
-* Online Anonymity Begets Nastiness! *-
-* Most Computer Attacks Originate in the US! *-

=~=~=~=

->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

Again, it's hard to imagine that a week ago we got "buried" in almost a foot of snow! As usual, another great round of forecasting (we were only to expect up to six inches of the white stuff!). And the rain that was to follow and wash it all away turned out to be a heavy drizzle that ended up freezing everything overnight. We survived - we're New Englanders! I am now looking out my study window and the snow is almost gone, again. The temps are getting more close to normal for this time of the year now also. And hopefully they'll continue to stay up there. Hey, it's Spring you know!

I've commented on this a number of times over the years; and it's happened again. I usually have my commentary written by Thursday night, before I receive Joe's column. Many, many times over the years, Joe and I have taken similar paths with our comments. This is one of those weeks.

For those of you who don't know, Joe and I have known each other for many years now. I don't remember whether it was an Atari show held in Connecticut, or a WAACE show, but we met face to face at one of them. I think that we had corresponded prior to that via online on Delphi and GEnie. We were fairly outspoken in those days on all things Atari. We both ended up writing for STReport, as well as some of the mainstream paper magazines. But it was STReport and the Atari shows that really made us close(er). We probably haven't seen each other in 15 years or so, but we have stayed in touch throughout the years. So, when I see Joe getting nostalgic - and at this particular week again, I got a kick out of.

You see, it's been 20 years since I first got my first Atari computer. It was mid to late 1987 when I see my first Atari computer - and 800. It belonged to my sister-in-law's husband (boyfriend at that time). He had a couple of them, and I watched him play a couple of simple games and run a couple of simple programs. I borrowed it for a couple of weeks. I had always enjoyed my Atari 2600, so an opportunity to see a machine that would allow me to play more "advanced" games on an Atari machine left me amazed. I was also looking for the means of writing and printing, rather than trying to fix an old Royal typewriter that I had. A computer to write with AND play games? I was excited.

After a couple of weeks, my enthusiasm waned. I wasn't a "computer person" I didn't like having to type in lines and lines of code and record them on a cassette recorder to run. I wasn't crazy about using a small television set for a monitor. It was all too cumbersome on my, floor. I wanted something easier to use, someplace where I could be more

organized. Some months went by. I had returned the computer, and forgot all about computers. A couple of more months went by and the guy asked me if I was still interested in an Atari computer, but in something with a bit more power and ease of use. He mentioned that Atari had recently come out with a faster machine, and that he had one. At that time, he was talking about the 520ST. The 1040ST had just come out and he was interested in upgrading to the new machine. We took a ride to one of the few Atari dealers that had sprung up in the area to look at the "new" machine. We played around with both models, and I was hooked. The guy had me totally sucked in - I wanted one. I couldn't afford a new computer (which he was counting on!) and he offered to sell me his 520. I bought it (and I still have it among my other machines). I immediately bought WordWriterST, DataManagerST, and a few other titles (a game or three were in that initial bunch of software, I'm sure!). I was hooked. I eventually added a few peripherals - a Panasonic dot-matrix printer, a second floppy drive. I was constantly taking a ride to that dealer, or others, in search for new software. Eventually I wandered in the dealer's shop while a user group meeting was going on inside. I joined. I went to a few local computer shows where Atari vendors were in attendance. I eventually added my first modem and an Atari SH-204 hard drive (wow, a whole 20 megs!). I was now online to the local bulletin boards, and then moved on to Delphi and GEnie, and later onto CompuServe.

The user group was flourishing, and I was meeting all kinds of new friends. I took over doing the group's newsletter, so I now needed a more powerful machine. I upgraded my machine with a meg of RAM, and bought a Panasonic laser printer ($1300 for that printer!!!), which I still have and use on my Falcon. My interests expanded beyond our local area due to my online capabilities. I started reading national magazines and became aware of various Atari shows. We went to some of those shows, hence eventually meeting Joe. Similar interests, and eventually similar paths on the Atari road.

Like Joe, I wasn't a programmer. Sure, I took a computer course in college - basic Fortran. I remember writing a program to generate the sum of the numbers from 1 to 100 (the total is 5050). While I was running an upgrade of the MichTron BBS software, I had to learn a little MCL programming. MCL was "MichTron Command Line" programming, which I learned was a derivative of C-programming. While I couldn't write that code from scratch, I could take existing code and change it around to fit my needs with the BBS. Not great, but it got the job done. Otherwise, I didn't have a head for programming. But I was always amazed to see the results of others' work! I still am. Programmers are special people as far as I'm concerned.

And look how far we've come in the last 20-plus years of computer technology! It's amazing. And throughout all this time, I'm still fascinated every time I turn on my Atari computer and do something with it - whether it's to work on A-ONE or play a round of Dungeon Master, Space Quest, or Leisure Suit Larry! On a simple 8 or 16 MHz powered computer. The thrill is still there, after all these years. In today's world, I'd be amazed if people kept there machine for more than 20 months, much less 20 years! Atari is special, in many ways.

Until next time...

=~=~=~=

New Service... Atari BBS Gateway!!

A long time & stable Dallas BBS has offered to provide a "Favorites page" for the Atari BBs users. Basically I provided a up to date BBS list of the active Atari sites out there, and he created a place you can go to, bring up an Atari telnet menu, and go to an Atari BBS. :)

Ever been curious to see the online world of Atari computers? Come check out the Prison Board BBS:

972-329-0781 (this number good for people want to try out Atari modems, and dialup means.)
216.62.20.217 (This IP number is great for Lantronix users, and has not changed for a considerable time.)

Never has the online Atari world been so easy to access from your Atari computer. Simply call up the above system, get to the main menu, X for the internet menu, and then A for the Atari menu. From there, it is simply a matter of hitting 1 through 9 for the Atari BBS's. Atari BBS's in many cases run on real Atari computers like the one you're calling with.

And the Prison board makes a great E-mail service too. :)

Let me know here if you have any questions, and many thanks to the Prison Board BBS for this awesome service.

FamilyNet <> Internet Gated Mail
http://www.familynet-international.org

=~=~=~=

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. First of all, let me thank those of you who wrote to me to offer job hunting advice or job leads. I appreciate it. I'm not having much luck, but there's no such thing as too much information, and it'll probably come in handy down the road.

In the meantime, between following job leads that don't pan out and spit-shining my resume, I've been thinking a lot about the road that's led me to this point.

Way back in the dark mists of time, when the hottest computer out there was the Apple][(not even the][+, mind you), I strolled into my college's computer lab to wait for a friend to finish his lab work so that we could go to lunch, I happened to sit down in front of one of the machines (and its 9" monochrome Sony monitor) and wondered exactly

what it took to make the machine do anything.

"Is there an instruction book or something?" I asked my friend. He simply pointed to the drawer built into the table. I pulled out the manual, which said "Apple LOGO Programming Manual" or something like that.

By the time my buddy had finished his lab work, I had written a little program that would ask you for a number between 1 and 180 and do a little 'Spirograph' dance on the screen. I was hooked. I knew from that moment on that I'd forever have a love of computers. But at the same time, I knew that I'd never be a programmer. It just didn't 'feel' right. I later came to realize, as I met more actual programmers, that they don't think exactly like the rest of us do. Not necessarily better or worse, just different. When I took my first actual programming class (UCSD Pascal), my opinion was confirmed. I could write a program that would do the same thing as the programmer (a REAL programmer-type personality) sitting next to me had come up with, but mine was... for lack of a better word, ugly. It didn't 'flow', it was usually much longer than the other guy's, it was slower, and it just generally looked and felt like it was limping along through its purpose.

Yep, the good lord gave me the ability to recognize elegant code, but not the ability to write it. I can look at a printout of someone's code and say that it's either elegant or kludgy, and tell (in a general way) if it's a fast or slow program... or if it's a half-fast program (inside joke, folks), but I can't write the elegant stuff myself. And that's okay with me. I know too many people who took jobs doing something they genuinely like (programming) only to burn out and end up hating it. It'd really bother me if I had that ability and I burned out at it.

So, after college, I scraped enough money together to buy a Timex-Sinclair ZX81 computer. It was a miracle of technology. Small, fast (for its time), and fairly cheap, it allowed me to deal not only with writing BASIC programs, but got me ready for a future of dealing with computer problems... overheating, sudden shut-downs and lock-ups were very common with that machine because of the 'rickety' electrical connections.

From there, I moved on to the Commodore 64. I was happy enough with that, because I'd moved up in the world and graduated for the first time from data storage on cassette tape to 5.25" single sided floppies. Now, instead of taking 8 minutes to load in a 6K program, it only took a minute and a half!

Now we get to the part about the road that led me to where I am now. While I was happy enough with the C64, I had the bad fortune to order the 1541 disk drive just before they disappeared from the market for months. There were rumors that the owner of Commodore, a guy named Jack Tramiel, had caused the shortage to raise the price of the darned thing. I didn't quite believe that, but I didn't like the way the whole thing was handled, so I vowed that I'd never buy another Tramiel/Commodore computer.

The local computer store that I'd taken to visiting (the second one, actually. The first was an Apple dealer. But they went 'corporate' and switched from bluejeans and rolled-up shirt sleeves to starched collars and power ties, so I moved on) was a registered Atari dealer. I saw the 800 as about equal to the C64 (right or wrong, that's how I saw it), and I'd heard a little bit about this new machine they were coming out

with... the ST... which, I'd been told, stood for Sixteen/Thirty-Two. It was supposed to run at an astounding 8 MHz, have a built-on OS, built in floppy drive (eventually), and a half a megabyte or a full megabyte of RAM. This machine was going to be a monster! Commodore was readying their Amiga, but there was that vow I'd made. Plus, I didn't like the name 'Amiga'. In Spanish, Amiga meant a female friend. Not a girlfriend, just a friend who happened to be a girl. Who the hell needed that?? <grin>

Of course, I didn't realize that the other half of my no-purchase thing, Jack Tramiel, had gotten out and away from Commodore, and had purchased Atari from Warner.

I went to that computer store at least once a week to hang around, drinking coffee and shooting the bull with the owner. When it came time to take orders for the first 1040 STs, I was one of the first. A shiny new 1040STfm with a SC1224 monitor was mine. Built-in double-sided floppy drive and all. It was so cool! I was in hog heaven, and had no intention of ever leaving.

Well, things change and Atari computers really didn't. The 'Power Without the Price' had indeed come with a price. In order to keep the cost down, they'd boxed themselves into several tight spots all at once. Instead of actually making the line evolve, they simply kept dropping the price. By the time they'd gotten around to serious advances with the ABAQ, the TT and the Falcon030, the handwriting was on the walls, and it was too late.

Well, that's the road I've traveled, and I'm glad and grateful of every single step. It's what led me to the point I'm at now. If even one thing had been different, I wouldn't be who I am now, and I probably wouldn't be typing this to you right now.

I'm just glad that the road that YOU'VE traveled brought you to the same place, and that we've spent some time traveling together. "Don't ya know we're all just travelers on the road to kingdom come".

Now let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

Ross Kuipers asks for information on replacing his floppy drive:

"I just bought an old Atari ST, with a shitload of discs.
Just powered up the beast, but the beast is a bit ill, it doesn't want to read discs.

So, first conclusion, disk drive failure. Is it possible to just add an "normal" pc style disc drive?"

Jerome Balti tells Ross:

"Last week I just revived my own ST after years in the attic (very clean but long storage). The disk was not good at the beginning, could not read anything properly, seemed to run slower.

Then, after a few days, and several tries with non important disks, it just recovered then worked fine again!

I also had it extended from 520 to 1040 but it seems that the memory extension is gone, because it works like a 520 now ...

I may have a look inside ..."

Our friend Hallvard Tangeraas adds:

"Yes, with a few minor modifications you can simply add a PC disk drive: ftp://gem.win.co.nz/hall/hardware/sony_144.zip "

Guillaume Tello posts this about the latest update to his Sudoku solver:

"Another update, 1.03. Now the program can generate HARD puzzles.

http://perso.orange.fr/gtello/downld_e.htm#prog

In fact, each time a MEDIUM one is created, the program tries to convert it to a HARD one. Not always possible! (because there must be only one solution!). Let’s say that 1 MEDIUM out of 5 is converted into HARD. It’s written under the grid with the difficulty level.

Generating a HARD grid lasts between 0"98 and 1"68 on my TT and between 5"49 and 8"55 on the Mega STE (and around 0"03 with Aranym...)"

Jean-Luc Ceccoli tells Guillaume:

"(Answer in english here to match the forum, but as we’re both french, I’ll post on fcsa in our native language)

O-kay, here are statistics :
- easy-level grids generated in 0.01 second,
- generates medium-level grids within 0.12 to 0.19 second,
- hard-level ones take 0.16 to 0.18 second, and
- all levels grigs are solved in 0.00 second !

That is, on my FalCT60 running at 96 MHz and secondary clock at 50 MHz. So, maybe ought you to increase the accuracy of your count."

Guillaume replies:

"I use the system clock at 200 Hz. So, if the solution is found in less than 0,005 s, it will be ZERO, that’s what happens.

Using another Timer with interruptions (for example at 1000Hz for milliseconds) would slow down the system, most of all on a Mega STE!

Another solution would be to play a blank DMA sound with a one second buffer. Each time the end of the buffer is reached, an interruption happens and you can count the seconds. Then, when the solution is found, reading the pointer into the buffer would give a precision of 50000Hz without slowing down the system.

But is it really worth it? And what about the machines without DMA

sound? Thanks for your tests! Hope I'll have a "CTT"060 one day!

I uploaded version 1.04 with a better interface to manage the options.

http://perso.orange.fr/gtello/downld_e.htm#prog"

Well folks, the messages petered out early this week, so that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

=~=~=~=

->In This Week's Gaming Section - Sony Names PS2 Titles for Euro PS3!
Racing Games Cause Risky Driving?
More Games, Fewer Books?
And much more!

=~=~=~=

->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Sony Names PS2 Titles for PS3 Euro Launch

For Euro gamers jonesing to know which PlayStation 1 and PlayStation 2 games will work on the European version of the soon-to-launch PlayStation 3, the wait is over. Sony Computer Entertainment released the titles of over a thousand games that will operate on the Euro PS3 when it hits store shelves on March 23.

The move comes in the wake of a public-relations snafu for the electronics giant. Last month, Sony reported that the PlayStation 3 version to be released in Europe won't carry a dedicated chip for PlayStation 2, and will instead use special emulation software to play older games, a move designed to reduce manufacturing costs.

According to Sony, one million PS3s will be available for the European launch. But as the console battle heats up with gaming rivals Nintendo and Microsoft, any PlayStation 3 problems, including a potential public-relations nightmare, might hit Sony hard.

Paul Jackson, principal analyst at Forrester Research, called Sony's console situation "not great" because of the PS3's delayed launch date in Europe and the fact that the PS3 in Europe will be more expensive than it is elsewhere.

Jackson explained that while there is backlash about the compatibility with earlier PlayStation titles, the lateness and the price are more significant. The U.S. model sells for $499 for the 20-GB version and $599 for 60-GB model. In Europe, the prices will be significantly higher.

"They're producing a Mercedes class product," he said. "A premium brand that's more than a mainstream Ford type box. They have to run with that despite these issues."

But Jackson did call attention to potential issues with Sony's marquee PS2 games, such as God Of War II, Grand Theft Auto, and FIFA. "One would hope these are the games that will work seamlessly," he said, as opposed to the more obscure titles from a few years ago. (All three titles are posted on Sony's list of compatible games at http://faq.eu.playstation.com/bc.)

In order to play the older games, owners of the new console will have to be running the latest version of the PlayStation 3 software, which is available as a free downloadable update.

A new downloadable update expected this Thursday for the PS3 will offer several new features. For example, it will allow users to help fight cancer and other diseases by taking part in a distributed-computing project from Stanford, and will support the use of Bluetooth peripherals, such as keyboards and mice.

According to Sony, all PlayStation 1 and more than 1,200 PlayStation 2 games will be compatible with the PS3 as a result of latest software updates. Sony also said that 30 PS3 titles would be launching on Friday.

Video Racing Games May Spur Risky Driving

People who play car racing video games may be more prone to drive recklessly and get into accidents, according to a study that adds to evidence that video games can influence the behavior of some players.

The study by German researchers published on Sunday examined the effect these games, featuring realistic driving environments with players often racing through city and suburban traffic, affect people who play them.

"Driving actions in these games often include competitive and reckless driving, speeding and crashing into other cars or pedestrians, or performing risky stunts with the vehicle. In short, most actions in racing games imply a very high risk of having an accident or severe crash in a highly realistic virtual road traffic environment," the researchers wrote.

The researchers first questioned 198 men and women. Those who played the games most often were more likely to report engaging in aggressive and risky driving and getting in auto accidents. Those who played these games less often reported driving more cautiously, the researchers said.

The researchers then studied 68 men and found those who played even one racing game took more risks afterward in traffic situations on a computer simulator than those who played another type of game.

Then the researchers had 83 men play either a racing game or another type of game, and found that those who played the racing game reported more

thoughts and feelings associated with risk-taking than the others.

"Risk-acceptance is one of the most prominent and important factors in the discussion of the origin of accidents caused by young drivers," Joerg Kubitzki of the Allianz Center for Technology, who conducted the study along with researchers at Munich's Ludwig-Maximilians University, said by e-mail.

The researchers cited previous research involving the "shooter" genre of games, in which the player shoots at adversaries, that found an increase in aggression-related thoughts and actions among people who played these games. But they said little had been known about the influence driving games might have on actual driving behavior of players.

"The question of age restrictions, legally or voluntary, should be discussed not only for "shooter" games but also for this kind of games, which have an impact on traffic safety," Kubitzki said.

The study appeared in the Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied, published by the American Psychological Association.

Atari's Silverfall in Stores Now

Atari, Inc. announced that Silverfall, a dynamic 3D action role-playing game (RPG), has arrived at retailers across North America. Developed by Monte Cristo Games, Silverfall is rated T for Teen and is available for the Windows platform at a suggested retail price of $39.95.

Silverfall casts players into a world torn between science and nature, forcing gamers to choose between the two in order to save the principal city from total destruction. The player must take on quests and defeat slews of opponents during the journey through the fascinating world of Nelwe. Two non-playing character (NPC) companions accompany and assist the player throughout the Silverfall adventure. Decisions made during each quest will be key as choices impact storyline, environment and accumulation of skills.

"Engaging, immersive and imaginative, Silverfall is a unique addition to the genre of role-playing games," said Stephen Baer, senior product manager, Atari, Inc. "Having been among the top five of GameSpot.com's 'Top 10 PC games' list for the last week, Silverfall is certainly a must-have for PC and RPG fans alike."

Silverfall offers a unique character building system of advancement and equipment that allows for complete customization of characters. Gamers can develop distinctive characters such as scientist troll magicians, elemental elf warriors, or mercantile goblins. Fighting and magic are employed throughout, and vary from melee, ranged, and technical, to light, elemental and dark. Gamers will play through a 25-hour main quest, numerous side quests and two multiplayer modes, player-versus-player and co-operative; and can further extend their experience with the included game editor, allowing would-be level designers to create their own adventures to play alone or with friends.

With four races to choose from, nine skill sets encompassing more than 130 individual skills, over 100 monsters, and advanced 3D graphics, Silverfall replenishes the RPG genre with a memorable hack-and-slash action

adventure.

For more information on Silverfall, Atari and its entire product line-up please visit www.atari.com <http://www.atari.com>.

Video Games’ Reach Bigger Than Thought

Video games reach more players than retail sales figures suggest, according to a report issued on Wednesday by private research and measurement firm Interpret.

The firm’s Gameasure report comes as video game makers try to woo advertisers, who are looking for new ways to connect with young males - an audience that plays a lot of video games and is watching less network television.

"Retail sales capture only a portion of the total audience playing individual game titles, suggesting current in-game advertising deals, which are primarily tied to these sales figures, undervalue the medium," Michael Dowling, Interpret’s CEO said in a statement.

Dowling said the report shows advertisers should consider the impact of social game play, game rentals, used game sales and pass-around.

For example, NPD Group research showed Activision Inc.’s "Call of Duty 3" sold 2 million units in the United States as of February 3. According to the Gameasure report, that game was played by 9 million people.

Electronic Arts Inc. has sold more than 6 million units of "Madden NFL 2007," but 14 million have actually played the game, the report said.

Microsoft Corp., maker of the Xbox 360 video game console and the blockbuster "Halo" game series, paid $200 million last year for in-game ad company Massive Inc. - lured by Massive’s agreements to dynamically place ads on such things as billboards and vending machines that appear within online games from Ubisoft Entertainment SA, THQ Inc. and Take-Two Interactive Software Inc.

Google said on Friday it bought video game advertising firm Adscape. Technology Web site Red Herring, citing individuals close to the deal, said the price tag was seen at around $23 million.

Independent in-game advertising start-ups Double Fusion and IGA Worldwide have already signed deals with major video game publishers.

Parks Associates said 2005 revenue from dynamic in-game ads was $80 million in 2005 and forecasts it could grow to $605 million by 2010.

More Video Games, Fewer Books at Schools?

Of all of the proposals aimed at improving America’s failing schools, there’s one idea kids will really like: More video games and fewer books.

At least a number of educators hope so, arguing that children would get

more excited about school and that video games can present real-life problems to solve.

Nobody is talking about putting violent video games such as "Doom" or "Mortal Kombat" into classrooms, particularly given concerns they may encourage aggressive behavior.

Instead, educators such as Indiana University associate professor Sasha Barab are developing alternative video games that can teach as well as entertain.

In one game designed by Barab, the player assumes the role of an investigator seeking to find out why fish are dying in a virtual park.

Various theories are offered such as excessive logging or farm fertilizers, and the players share data about water quality and compare hypotheses. If they recommend kicking out the loggers, the park may go bankrupt, giving students a real-world dilemma.

"I believe in digital media literacy. If we don’t make changes in the way we educate our children, they will be left behind in world markets," said Barab, a former high school teacher. "Right now, I’m not that optimistic about where schools are headed."

Another backer of video games as educational tools is Katie Salen. A game designer, Salen is working with a group called New Visions for Public Schools to establish a school in New York City for grades six through 12 that would integrate video games into the entire curriculum.

"There’s a lot of moral panic about addiction to games. There’s a negative public perception and we know we have to deal with that. But teachers have been using games for years and years," Salen said.

"We’re looking at how games work and we want to think about ways to redeliver information. It’s quite unknown territory."

The MacArthur Foundation is investing $50 million to investigate whether video games promote learning, and last month sponsored a panel discussion on the subject in Chicago.

"Kids don’t just play games. The games inspire so they then turn to books," said Connie Yowell, director of education at the Chicago-based foundation. "There are bad games, but people tend to blame the tools instead of learning about the tools."

To be sure, there are plenty of questions about the educational value of video games, as compared with books and traditional tools.

Dr. Joshua Freedman, a neuropsychiatrist at the University of California, Los Angeles, said video games are interactive and can help with spatial concepts.

"But there’s still a question about the value to the extent that most of the world is not a video game. They’re not getting problems in real world situation," he said.

Video games engage children with continuous action, a concept known as "enthrallment," that raises the threshold for engagement, Freedman said.

"It’s the equivalent of giving kids a lot of sweets and then wondering why

they don’t want to eat regular food," he said.

Several studies have shown that video-game playing corresponds to higher rates of attention deficit disorder (ADD) among children and are associated with aggressive behavior. Freedman noted, however that cause and effect are difficult to prove.

"I wouldn’t say that using more games in education shouldn’t be done, I’m just saying that it should be done with our eyes open," he said.

One teen, Shelby Levin, a tenth grader with a 3.5 grade point average at North Farmington High School in Farmington, Michigan, acknowledges that he plays games mostly for fun.

A fan of sports games and violent games like Grand Theft Auto, Levin, says: "I don’t think you can learn more from playing video games than from reading a book or doing an assignment."

But Levin, 16, also participates in the virtual world online called Second Life, and says he does pick-up some important skills from his time on it.

"In Second Life, I’m playing with kids from France, Italy and Germany. We all come together and hang out online. You learn about entrepreneurship because you have to hustle people and make money," he said.

That’s one reason some are advocating classroom time to be teaching children how to build virtual worlds - much like archeologists, engineers, and others do - and to play games alongside others on the Web.

What’s more, the trend toward administering more standardized tests does not prepare children for a digital future, said David Williamson Shaffer of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and author of "How Computer Games Help Children Learn."

"We’ve organized our schools using methods from the Middle Ages," Shaffer said. "We should start to have a discussion about what needs to be learned."

Barab marvels at the skills her son has mastered from video games, but limits him to six hours a week, fearing addiction.

"My 6-year-old, Julian, can step into a video game and a world of rules and figure them out. He’s not scared of the unknown or scared of failing. I think that’s something valuable that video games provide. But, I want him to experience much more, and relationships outside of games," Barab added.

=~=~=~=

A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Judge Strikes Down Internet Porn Law

A 1998 law designed to block children from viewing pornography Web sites violates free speech rights, a U.S. federal court ruled on Thursday, in a blow to government efforts to restrict Internet smut.

The ruling sided with a challenge brought by the American Civil Liberties Union, which had argued that the provisions of the Child Online Protection Act were too restrictive and violated the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that protects free speech.

Judge Lowell Reed of the U.S. District Court in Philadelphia wrote in his ruling that while he sympathized with the goal of restricting minors from seeing pornography, other means that were less restrictive of free speech, such as software filters, were available to block such content.

"I may not turn a blind eye to the law ... to protect this nation’s youth by upholding a flawed statute, especially when a more effective and less restrictive alternative is readily available," the judge wrote in his ruling.

Government lawyers had argued during the four-week trial that Internet filters were ineffective tools since most parents did not actively use them.

Supporters of the law predicted the ruling will be appealed or that new legislation would be passed by Congress.

"It doesn’t matter if the Republicans are in the majority or the Democrats. This issue is something both sides of the aisle feel strongly about," said Donna Rice Hughes of Enough Is Enough, an Internet pornography watchdog group.

John Morris, a lawyer for the Center for Democracy and Technology, told reporters in a teleconference, "This law is not really aimed at commercial pornography but really reaches far beyond that to a broad range of valuable content."

The Child Online Protection Act made it a crime for any person to provide minors access to "harmful material" over the Internet. Violators could be fined up to $50,000 and imprisoned for up to 6 months.

The law was never enforced because it was immediately challenged in court after being signed into law by former President Bill Clinton.

MySpace Enters Politics

MySpace launched a U.S. presidential campaign site Monday, and it has the potential of reaching millions of people who don’t otherwise go to political Web sites, one analyst said.

MySpace, a division of Fox Interactive Media Inc., launched MySpace Impact, featuring MySpace pages for 2008 presidential candidates.

Candidates with pages on MySpace Monday were Democratic Senators Hillary Clinton of New York; Barack Obama of Illinois; Joe Biden of Delaware; and

Dennis Kucinich of Ohio; John Edwards, a former North Carolina senator and 2004 vice presidential candidate, along with Republicans Senator John McCain of Arizona; former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani; and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney. Libertarian Ron Paul also has a page.

MySpace hopes to play a "powerful role" in the 2008 elections, CEO Chris DeWolfe said in a statement. The site plans to give users easy-to-use information in a format they can relate to, he said.

MySpace, with 64.4 million unique visitors from the U.S. in February, has the potential to play a major role, said Andrew Lipsman, a senior analyst at ComScore Networks, a Web traffic measurement firm. MySpace users represented about 37 percent of all U.S. Internet users, he said.

In addition, people ages 18 to 24 remain the heaviest users of MySpace and the age group least likely to go to other political sites. "There's certainly the opportunity to drive new traffic to that channel... because the site is so large," he said.

As of Monday afternoon, "friends" were already on board various candidate sites. For instance, Romney, McCain and Clinton each had more than 1,000 MySpace friends, while Obama had more than 68,000. Paul, also running for president, had about 350 friends. Giuliani's profile was set to "private" and so it could not be publicly seen.

The candidates themselves will have a hand in determining what traffic comes to the MySpace Impact site, he said. "The real test will be determined on how good the content is," he said.

MySpace will roll out an Impact-specific profile, which will allow candidates to use the network's first "viral" fund-raising tool, within weeks, MySpace said. MySpace will also host a series of online political events through the 2008 presidential elections.

Video War Erupts Between Clinton and Obama

Ten months before the first 2008 U.S. presidential primary, a video war has erupted between supporters of Democratic Sens. Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama (news, bio, voting record), their opening skirmish on the new campaign battleground - the Internet.

The supporters have posted their own political versions spoofing a 1984 commercial in which Apple Computer introduced its Macintosh personal computer by attacking larger rival IBM as totalitarian.

The anti-Clinton video, dubbed "Vote Different," has been splashed across the television news and been viewed almost 1.4 million times on the popular video Web site YouTube since it was posted on March 5.

The anti-Obama clip, "Barack 1984," posted on the same site three days ago has had more than 250,000 viewings.

"This is the opening round," said Carol Darr, director of the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet at George Washington University. "The Internet is going to be the main event."

"Anything that gets the attention of millions of eyeballs - and

particularly millions of eyeballs of people who at this early stage are watching - matters," she said, comparing the videos with the popular JibJab Web videos of the 2004 campaign that poked fun at President George W. Bush and Democratic challenger Sen. John Kerry.

Apple’s commercial aired during the Super Bowl in 1984 and spoofed George Orwell’s book "1984," which portrays a totalitarian society.

The spliced clip of Clinton shows virtual clones with shaved heads walking with military precision while she lauds the start of her presidential bid, which she has dubbed as a conversation with America.

As she speaks, armed guards chase a woman in tight shorts and a tank top through the crowd as she throws a sledgehammer shattering the screen.

"On January 14th, the Democratic Primary will begin. And you’ll see why 2008 won’t be like "1984," says the video, which then shows the old Apple computer logo in the form of an "O" with the Internet address for Obama’s campaign below: barackobama.com.

Obama has disavowed any connection to the clip and Clinton has reportedly laughed it off, suggesting it was better than her recent off-key rendition of the Star Spangled Banner national anthem that also has been shown on YouTube.

The rival clip parodies the same Apple commercial and uses a speech by Obama of Illinois to unveil his support for the Chicago Bears professional football team in the Super Bowl.

"The Bears Lost So Will Obama. Clinton for President," it said.

A spokesman for Clinton, of New York, declined comment and a representative for Obama was not immediately available for comment.

’Wiki’ Goes Legit

Six years after Wikipedia.org debuted, editors at the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) have finally deigned to add the word "wiki" to the OED’s online version.

The term joined a handful of other technology-related entries added to the online OED as part of the dictionary’s quarterly update. Also added: "Infobahn," "malware," "undelete" and "virtualize."

"[Wiki] joins a small but distinguished group of words which are directly or ultimately borrowings into English from Hawaiian," noted Graeme Diamond, OED’s principal editor of new words, on the dictionary’s site. He also laid claim to a connection between the OED and the new entry.

"It has been suggested that in some ways the OED itself resembles a wiki: its long tradition of working on collaborative principles means it has welcomed the contribution of information and quotation evidence from the public for over 150 years," Diamond said.

Although wiki has been in use since at least 1995 - Ward Cunningham created the WikiWikiWeb that year as the first collaborative, user-edited resource - the word was popularized by Wikipedia.org, the Internet’s

largest encyclopedia, founded in January 2001.

Nontechnical entries just added to the OED include "ixnay," "RICO," "ta-da" and "scooby."

The previous update in December 2006 lacked much action on the tech side - "groupware," "superminicomputer" and "webcast" were about it - but it did give the OED such upper-crust entries as "heinie" and "hinky."

Access to the online edition of the OED costs US$29.95 monthly, or $295 a year, for users in North or South America.

Computing Pioneer Backus Dies

John Backus, whose development of the Fortran programming language in the 1950s changed how people interacted with computers and paved the way for modern software, has died. He was 82.

Backus died Saturday in Ashland, Ore., according to IBM Corp., where he spent his career.

Prior to Fortran, computers had to be meticulously "hand-coded" - programmed in the raw strings of digits that triggered actions inside the machine. Fortran was a "high-level" language because it abstracted that work - it let programmers enter commands in a more intuitive system, which the computer would translate into machine code on its own.

"It was just a quantum leap. It changed the game in a way that has only happened two or three times in the computer industry," said Jim Horning, a longtime programmer who co-chairs the Association for Computing Machinery’s award committee.

That organization gave Backus its 1977 Turing Award, one of the industry’s highest accolades. Backus also won a National Medal of Science in 1975 and got the 1993 Charles Stark Draper Prize, the top honor from the National Academy of Engineering.

"Much of my work has come from being lazy," Backus told Think, the IBM employee magazine, in 1979. "I didn’t like writing programs, and so, when I was working on the IBM 701 (an early computer), writing programs for computing missile trajectories, I started work on a programming system to make it easier to write programs."

John Warner (news, bio, voting record) Backus was born in Wilmington, Del., in 1924. His father was a chemist who became a stockbroker. Backus had what he would later describe as a "checkered educational career" in prep school and the University of Virginia, which he left after six months. After being drafted into the Army, Backus studied medicine but dropped it when he found radio engineering more compelling.

Backus finally found his calling in math, and he pursued a master’s degree at Columbia University in New York. Shortly before graduating, Backus toured the IBM offices in midtown Manhattan and came across the company’s Selective Sequence Electronic Calculator, an early computer stuffed with 13,000 vacuum tubes. Backus met one of the machine’s inventors, Rex Seeber - who "gave me a little homemade test and hired me on the spot," Backus recalled in 1979.

Backus' early work at IBM included computing lunar positions on the balky, bulky computers that were state of the art in the 1950s. But he tired of hand-coding the hardware, and in 1954 he got his bosses to let him assemble a team that could design an easier system.

The result, Fortran, short for Formula Translation, reduced the number of programming statements necessary to operate a machine by a factor of 20.

Even more importantly, "it took about as long to write one line of Fortran as one line of assembly code," Horning said. Previous attempts at high-level language had failed on that count, so Fortran showed skeptics that machines could run just as efficiently without hand-coding.

From there, a wide range of programming languages and software approaches proliferated, although Fortran also evolved over the years and remains in use.

Known as a maverick who preferred jeans to IBM's buttoned-up, conservative style, Backus stayed with the company until his retirement in 1991. Among his other important contributions was a method for describing the particular grammar of computer languages. The system came to be known as Backus-Naur Form.

Privacy For Internet Names Moves Forward

Many owners of Internet addresses face this quandary: Provide your real contact information when you register a domain name and subject yourself to junk or harassment. Or enter fake data and risk losing it outright.

Help may be on the way as a key task force last week endorsed a proposal that would give more privacy options to small businesses, individuals with personal Web sites and other domain name owners.

"At the end of the day, they are not going to have personal contact information on public display," said Ross Rader, a task force member and director of retail services for registration company Tucows Inc. "That's the big change for domain name owners."

At issue is a publicly available database known as Whois. With it, anyone can find out the full names, organizations, postal and e-mail addresses and phone numbers behind domain names.

Hearings on the changes are expected next week in Lisbon, Portugal, before the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN, the main oversight agency for Internet addresses.

Resolution, however, could take several more months or even years, with crucial details on implementation still unsettled and a vocal minority backing an alternative.

Under the endorsed proposal, some six years in the making, domain name registrants would be able to list third-party contact information in place of their own, to the chagrin of businesses and intellectual-property lawyers worried that cybersquatters and scam artists could more easily hide their identities.

"It would just make it that much more difficult and costly to find out who's behind a name," said Miriam Karlin, manager of legal affairs for International Data Group Inc., publisher of PC World and other magazines. She said she looks up Whois data daily to pursue trademark and copyright violators.

Privacy wasn't a big consideration when the current addressing system started in the 1980s. Back then, government and university researchers who dominated the Internet knew one another and didn't mind sharing personal details to resolve technical problems.

Today, the Whois database is used for much more. Law-enforcement officials and Internet service providers use it to fight fraud and hacking. Lawyers depend on it to chase trademark and copyright violators. Journalists rely on it to reach Web site owners. And spammers mine it to send junk mailings for Web site hosting and other services.

And Internet users have come to expect more privacy and even anonymity. Small businesses work out of homes. Individuals use Web sites to criticize large corporations or government officials. The Whois database, for many, reveals too much.

The requirements for domain name owners to provide such details also contradict, in some cases, European privacy laws that are stricter than those in the United States.

Registration companies generally don't check contact information for accuracy, but submitting fake data could result in missing important service and renewal notices. It also could be grounds for terminating a domain name.

Over the past few years, some companies have been offering proxy services, for a fee, letting domain name owners list the proxy rather than themselves as the contact.

It's akin to an unlisted phone number, though with questionable legal status. The U.S. government has banned proxies entirely for addresses ending in ".us," even after many had already registered names behind them.

Critics also complain that such services can be too quick or too slow, depending on whom you ask, in revealing identities under legal pressure.

"Right now there's no regulation, no accreditation, no standards," said Margie Milam, general counsel for MarkMonitor, a brand-protection firm. "Some can take weeks, which can slow down investigations."

The task force proposal, known as operational point of contact, would make third-party contacts a standard offering. Domain name owners could list themselves, a lawyer, a service provider or just about anyone else; that contact would forward important communications back to the owner.

Details must still be worked out, but the domain name registrant rather than the proxy would likely be clearly identified as the legal owner, unlike the current, vague arrangement. ICANN's staff also pressed for more clarity on to whom and under what circumstances the outside contact would have to release data.

Although that proposal received a slight majority on the Whois task force, some stakeholders including businesses and lawyers have pushed an alternative known as special circumstances. Domain name holders would have

to make personal contact details available, as they do today, unless they can justify a special circumstance, such as running a shelter for battered women.

"On the whole, society is much better off having this kind of transparency and accountability," said Steven Metalitz, an intellectual-property lawyer on the task force.

ICANN's Council of the Generic Names Supporting Organization plans public hearings in Lisbon, after which it could make a recommendation or convene another task force to tackle implementation details.

Supporters of the new proposal remain hopeful that resolution is near.

"A lot of public interest groups have been waiting a long time to see if this process actually works or if it's just a charade," said Wendy Seltzer, a non-voting task force member and fellow with Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. "If this turns out to have been for naught, you will have a lot of frustrated people."

Most Computer Attacks Originate In U.S.

The United States generates more malicious computer activity than any other country, and sophisticated hackers worldwide are banding together in highly efficient crime rings, according to a new report.

Researchers at Cupertino-based Symantec Corp. also found that fierce competition in the criminal underworld is driving down prices for stolen financial information.

Criminals may purchase verified credit card numbers for as little as $1, and they can buy a complete identity - a date of birth and U.S. bank account, credit card and government-issued identification numbers - for $14, according to Symantec's twice-yearly Internet Security Threat Report released Monday.

Researchers at the security software company found that about a third of all computer attacks worldwide in the second half of 2006 originated from machines in the United States. That makes the United States the most fertile breeding ground for threats such as spam, phishing and malicious code, easily surpassing runners-up China, which generates 10 percent of attacks, and Germany, which generates 7 percent.

The United States also leads in "bot network activity." Bots are compromised computers controlled remotely and operating in concert to pump out spam or perform other nefarious acts.

The legitimate owner of the computer typically doesn't know the machine has been taken over, and the phenomenon is largely responsible for the palpable increase in junk e-mail in the past half year.

Spam made up 59 percent of all e-mail traffic Symantec monitored. That's up 5 percentage points from the previous period. Much of the spam was related to stock picks and other financial scams.

The United States is also home to more than half of the world's "underground economy servers", typically corporate computers that have

been commandeered to facilitate clandestine transactions involving stolen data and may be compromised for as little as two hours or as long as two weeks, according to the report.

The study marks the first time Symantec researchers have studied the national origins of computer attacks. The report focused on attacks during the last half of 2006 on more than 120 million computers running Symantec antivirus software. The company operates more than 2 million decoy e-mail accounts designed to attract messages from around the world to identify spam and phishing activity.

Alfred Huger, vice president of Symantec Security Response, said online criminals appear to be adopting more sophisticated means of "self-policing." They're launching denial-of-service attacks on rivals' servers and posting pictures online of competitors' faces.

"It's ruthless, highly organized and highly evolved," Huger said.

One of the most startling findings: The worldwide number of bot-infected computers rose, an increase of about 29 percent from the previous six months, to more than 6 million computers total, while the number of servers controlling them plunged. The number of such "command-and-control" servers declined by about 25 percent to around 4,700.

Symantec researchers said the decrease signifies that bot network owners are consolidating to expand their networks, creating a more centralized, efficient structure for launching attacks.

Twenty-six percent of the world's bot-infected computers were in China, a higher percentage than any other country.

According to Symantec, Microsoft Corp.'s Internet Explorer was themost-targeted Web browser, attracting 77 percent of all browser attacks.

Symantec said it expects to see more threats begin to emerge against Microsoft's Vista operating system. It also expects multiplayer online games to be targeted by phishers, who fool users into divulging passwords or other personal information by creating fake Web sites that look like the real thing.

Global Malady: Virus Writers Worldwide Team Up

Security researchers have been touting the growing nature of professionalism among virus authors over the last several years, but new evidence points to increased cooperation between malware writers spread around the globe, according to some experts.

The practice of using widely-distributed IP addresses to distribute malware and spam to help avoid detection by security companies and law enforcement officials is nothing new among electronic schemers.

However, there is reason to believe that cyber-criminals, specifically virus authors and botnet operators, may be teaming more frequently with people in other regions of the world to help facilitate their respective attacks, said Chris Boyd, the U.K.-based director of malware research at FaceTime Labs, a division of software maker FaceTime Communications.

Boyd - who used his presentation at the RSA Conference 2007 in February to detail botnet activity, including a group based out of the Middle East known as the Q8Army that is suspected to back radical Islamist activity - said that there is even mounting evidence that hackers in China are teaming with their Western counterparts to help boost the quality of their respective attacks.

There have been ties established between groups of crimeware authors in the United States, South America, and Eastern Europe that have been evident for some time, Boyd said, but an increasing number of attacks being examined by the researcher bare clues that Chinese coders are looking outside their borders for expertise in helping to improve and spread their work.

"It was previously unthinkable that hackers in the West and China would be working together, but we're increasingly seeing interplay of code," Boyd said. "The new techniques we're seeing come out of China suggest that they are picking up tips from hackers in the West to help them fly under the radar, and we feel there will be more of this activity in the coming months."

Boyd said that like the Q8Army - which allegedly used instant messaging attacks to plant spyware on people's computers and create a massive worldwide botnet system - Chinese hackers have been known in the past for distributing somewhat crude programs that were relatively easy for security researchers to isolate.

But over the past several months, the expert said, he has seen far more advanced threats with far less obvious social engineering mistakes emanating from the world's most populous nation.

While the Chinese malware writers are turning to Westerners to learn the subtleties of tricking people outside their country into falling for their attacks, Westerners are likely asking their new partners to share their techniques for avoiding detection by researchers and law enforcement.

"[Virus writers] in America want to learn the finer arts of what not to do to get caught online, and the groups in China appear to be very advanced in that regard," said Boyd. "With the government atmosphere there, where you're likely to go to jail if you get caught committing a crime, they have to be very careful."

The range of attacks - which Boyd said he has observed on underground security research forums that he declined to identify by name - span from less dangerous adware programs to extremely advanced root kits, according to the expert with FaceTime.

Other researchers said that such a shift in partnerships could significantly improve malware coming out of regions like China, where more complex language barriers with Western users have helped foil many threats in the past.

In addition to helping foreigners craft threats that are less likely to throw up red flags to end users and security systems, based on their improved spelling and grammar, international hacker cooperation can allow threat writers to share popular cultural items that make their social engineering ploys more effective.

"Many times, malware writers overseas have gone to great lengths to create the threats themselves, but poor social engineering is a tip-off to native English speakers," said Craig Schmugar, threat research manager for McAfee’s Avert Labs group. "And by finding out what sort of things are currently popular in another region, they’re also less likely to tip their hands and pull in more people with social engineering."

Schmugar said that by branching out and working with malware writers in other locales, cyber-criminals may also introduce more opportunities for researchers to infiltrate their ranks and put a stop to their operations. He said that some attacks may also be designed by their authors to merely to appear as if they were created in a foreign nation to help throw researchers and law enforcement off their trails.

"Mostly, we’re seeing individuals trying to become more globally organized, but the really organized groups do have agents around the globe and some sort of management structure," Schmugar said. "In one token, the cooperation can help them be more effective, but on the other hand, it might present new opportunities to get caught; how do you know when you can trust what someone tells you about themselves if they’re in another part of the world?"

Study Exposes ’Search Spam’

Anyone brave enough to type "cheap tickets" in a search engine can find a plethora of one-page Web sites designed to drive traffic to other Web sites and generate click-through advertising revenue.

They’re an irritant to users and another way in which the Internet is being abused for profit. But a new study by a team of Microsoft Corp. and University of California researchers has shed light on how so-called "search spammers" work and how advertisers can help stop the practice.

"By exposing the end-to-end search spamming activities, we hope to... encourage advertisers to scrutinize those syndicators and traffic affiliates who are profiting from spam traffic at the expense of the long-term health of the Web," wrote authors Yi-Min Wang and Ming Ma of Microsoft Research and Yuan Niu and Hao Chen of the University of California in Davis. Their research will be reviewed at the 16th International World Wide Web Conference in Banff, Alberta, in May.

The researchers looked at "redirection spam," where a user clicks on a URL (uniform resource locator) but is then automatically transferred to a different URL or shown advertising content that originates from somewhere else on the Web.

Often, legitimate companies have their advertisements served on questionable sites through redirections designed to "obfuscate the connection between the advertisers and the spammers," the researchers wrote.

In one example, they traced the origin of advertisements for orbitz.com, a popular travel services site, that appeared on suspicious Web pages. They uncovered five layers that lie between a legitimate advertiser and a questionable search spam Web site.

For example, a business such as orbitz.com may buy advertising from a

syndicator, who then buys space on high-traffic Web pages from an aggregator.

In turn, the aggregator buys traffic from Web spammers. The spammers set up the millions of "doorway" pages, designed to show up high in the search engine rankings, for products such as ringtones or prescription drugs. They also distribute URLs by inserting them as comments on users' blogs.

If those links are clicked, the doorway pages then redirect to other pages, potentially bringing revenue back to its controller via pay-per-click advertising offered by companies such as Google Inc. through its AdSense program.

But by using new spam detection and Web page analysis, the researchers say they've narrowed down some of the confusing redirection chains, from hosters of doorway pages through to redirection domains.

Three out of every four unique Blogspot.com URLs that appeared in the top 50 results for commercial queries were spam, the study said. Blogspot is the hosting site for Google's blogging service. Blogs created for marketing purposes are sometimes referred to as "splogs."

Also, one domain - topsearch10.com - hosted many other redirection domains that were responsible for 22 percent to 25 percent of the spam detected during the researchers' tests, the study said.

They also narrowed down two blocks of IP (Internet protocol) addresses that advertisements were directed through to spammers' pages. That bottleneck, they said, "may prove to be the best layer to attacking the search spam problem."

A responsibility also lies with advertisers to assert greater control over where and how their ads are placed.

"Ultimately, it is advertisers' money that is funding the search spam industry, which is increasingly cluttering the Web with low-quality content and reducing Web users' productivity," they wrote.

U.S. Judge Throws Out Defamation Suit Against Google

A U.S. judge has thrown out a lawsuit challenging the fairness of how Web search leader Google Inc. calculates the popularity of Web sites in determining search results, court papers show.

In a ruling issued on Friday that came to light on Tuesday, Judge Jeremy Fogel of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California dismissed a lawsuit against Google by parenting information site KinderStart.

The judge also imposed yet-to-be-determined sanctions on KinderStart legal counsel Gregory Yu for making unsupported allegations against Google.

KinderStart sued Google in March 2006 alleging the Mountain View, California-based Internet company had defamed the site by cutting it from its Web search ranking system.

The Norwalk, Connecticut-based company, which features links to

information about raising children, accused Google of violations of antitrust, free speech, unfair competition and defamation and libel laws.

In its suit, the company argued its site's sudden demotion in March 2005 to a "zero" ranking in Google's search system had severely harmed its business.

KinderStart had sought class action status on behalf of what is said were many other sites that suffered the same fate as Google fine-tunes Web site rankings in search results.

"KinderStart had failed to explain how Google caused injury to it by a provably false statement ... as distinguished from an unfavorable opinion about KinderStart.com's importance," the judge's ruling states.

In addition, the judge said the plaintiff's counsel should have removed allegations that Google discriminated against or manipulated its Web search rankings after the judge ordered the lawyer to do so in an interim ruling.

"While Yu has brought a novel challenge to a major corporation, it is apparent that to some extent he has overreached in doing so," Fogel said. "Yu had a professional responsibility to refrain from filing such allegations if he did not have appropriate supporting evidence."

The judge granted Google the right to seek attorneys fees for the costs of defending against these specific charges. Both sides have 14 days to file motions before the judge determines monetary damages against Yu.

Yu is with the firm Global Law Group of San Mateo.

"All options are being explored. That's all that we are going to say at this point," he told Reuters, but declined to describe his plans further.

A Google attorney said the company felt vindicated.

"We always felt these claims were unjustified, because courts have consistently rejected complaints over search engine rankings, so we're pleased that Judge Fogel promptly dismissed this case," Google litigation counsel Hilary Ware said in a company statement.

Online Anonymity Lets Users Gets Nasty

When a California woman recently gave birth to a healthy baby just two days after learning she was pregnant, the sudden change to her life was challenging enough. What April Branum definitely didn't need was a deluge of nasty Internet comments.

Postings on message boards made cracks about Branum's weight (about 400 pounds - one reason she says didn't realize sooner she was pregnant). They also analyzed her housekeeping ability, based on a photo of her home. And they called her names. "A pig is a pig," one person wrote. Another suggested that she "go on the show 'The Biggest Loser.'"

"The thing that bothered me most was, people assumed because I am overweight, I'm going to be a bad mom," Branum says. "And that is not one little bit true."

It was yet another example of how the Internet, and the anonymity it affords, has given a public stage to people’s basest thoughts, ones that in earlier eras likely never would have traveled past the watercooler, the kitchen table or the next barstool.

Such incidents, and there are countless across cyberspace, also raise the question: Is there anything to be done about it? Or is a decline in civil discourse simply the price that we pay for the advance of technology?

"The Internet really amplifies everything," says Jeffrey Cole, of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. "We have a lot of opinions out there. All of a sudden there’s a place we can go to share them." Add to that the freedom that anonymity provides, he says, and it "can lead to a rowdy Wild West situation, with no one to filter it."

"It’s all things said reflexively, without thinking," says Cole, who tracks the political and social impact of the Internet as director of Annenberg’s Center for the Digital Future.

"My guess is that if you went back to these people, a lot of them would have second thoughts." And if you asked them to add their name, as in a traditional letter to the editor? "They’d be embarrassed."

There are examples everywhere of anonymous comments that cause harm. On even the most innocuous sites, a parenting message board, for example, anonymity often leads to the type of response that would hardly be likely if names were attached.

"People post insults on here left and right," one person wrote Monday on the New York edition of urbanbaby.com, a networking site for new mothers. "It seems the common word these posts have is Fat. Just because someone is overweight, fat, thick whatever you call us, doesn’t mean we are ugly, lazy or insecure ... So stop the childish remarks."

News organizations, struggling to find ways to keep their readers involved in an increasingly digital and interactive world, are trying to strike the right balance.

Branum’s case fueled debate at the Orange County Register, whose Web site had only recently added a public comment section after news stories. OCRegister.com deputy editor Jeff Light says the site has modified its message board, only six weeks old, in response to staff concerns about inappropriate posts. Now, among other changes, language is more specific about what the site expects from those who post, and how a comment can be deleted.

Ideally, Light says, it’s the users, not the site’s operators, that should determine what is discussed, and how. "The comment area is not a journalistic space," he says. "The point is for people to react freely."

And Yahoo News took down its message boards completely in December, with the goal of finding a new system that doesn’t let a small group of vocal users dominate the discourse. "Our hope is to raise the value of the conversation," says Yahoo spokesman Brian Nelson.

Harm can be much greater when people are singled out by name on the Web; such attacks can hurt someone’s career or home life. One entrepreneur is trying to help people recover from such attacks with a company he started

last year: ReputationDefender.

"It takes one person 20 minutes to destroy your reputation, and it costs them nothing," says Michael Fertik, who employs about 40 part-time "agents" on what he calls "search and destroy" missions against unwarranted Internet attacks. "It can take you 200 hours to try to clean it up."

Fertik, who says his is the only company providing such a service, has clients ranging from victims of unfair comments on dating Web sites to people who feel they've been mistreated on MySpace.com. He also is helping several female law students fight what they call defamatory sexist and racist comments on a message board widely read in the legal community. Their story was reported earlier this month by The Washington Post.

Fertik says he offers "a PR service for the everyday person," charging a fee that can be as low as $10 monthly, for a thorough search of Internet references. The "destroy" part starts with a polite letter and can occasionally lead to threatened legal action. (Generally, Web site operators are not liable for offensive postings.)

One person who takes it pretty much in stride is Branum, the California woman who was unaware she was pregnant until Feb. 26, two days before she gave birth. Her sister had alerted the newspaper to the story. Neither of them anticipated the nasty comments that rolled in.

But, Branum says, "it's America. People are going to say what they're going to say. It's going to be everywhere, and you can't stop it. Anybody's allowed." She says the flip side was the posts that came in defending her, and the cards and letters from people she didn't know, wishing her luck.

Her fiance was less forgiving, even calling the paper to complain. Branum said she had a simple response for him: "Deal with it."

Vote On '.xxx' Internet Address Nears

Online pornographers and religious groups are in a rare alliance as a key Internet oversight agency nears a decision on creating a virtual red-light district through a ".xxx" Internet address.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, which has already rejected similar proposals twice since 2000, planned to vote as early as next week on whether to approve the domain name for voluntary use by porn sites.

The decision ultimately could hinge on whether ".xxx" has the support of the adult-entertainment industry - and many porn sites have been strongly opposed.

"One of the criteria is that it (must) have general support among the industry it's supposed to serve, and it does not," said Mark Kernes, a board member with the industry trade group Free Speech Coalition. "I have not met one single webmaster or adult video producer that is in favor of '.xxx,' and I've met a lot of them."

Porn sites are largely concerned that the domain name, while billed as

voluntary, would make it easier for governments to later mandate its use and "essentially ghettoize sexual information on the Web," Kernes said.

ICM Registry Inc., the company behind the proposal, has vowed to fight any government efforts to compel its use and cited preregistrations of some 76,000 names as evidence of support. Kernes said many Web sites reserved names simply to prevent someone else from having it.

The Free Speech Coalition believes a domain name for kids-friendly sites would be more appropriate.

Given its voluntary nature, ".xxx" is unlikely to have much effect on parents' ability to block porn sites.

And because a domain name serves merely as an easy-to-remember moniker for a site's actual numeric Internet address, even if a government were to mandate its use, a child could simply punch in the numeric address of any blocked ".xxx" name.

Religious groups worry that ".xxx" would legitimize and expand the number of adults sites, which more than a third of U.S. Internet users visit each month, according to comScore Media Metrix. The Web site measurement firm said 4 percent of all Web traffic and 2 percent of all time spent Web surfing involved an adult site.

"They will keep their '.com' domains, and I have no doubt they will buy their '.xxx' as well," said Patrick Trueman, special counsel for the Alliance Defense Fund, a Christian public-interest law firm. "There will be twice as much pornography on the Internet."

Trueman and other critics say ICM will be the only beneficiaries.

The startup, founded and funded by four entrepreneurs with backgrounds in domain names and U.K. Internet companies, plans to charge $60 to register a name - 10 times the fees for ".com." Ten dollars of it would go to a companion nonprofit group that would set policies for ".xxx" use and recommend business practices for combating child pornography and promoting child safety.

ICANN tabled and effectively rejected a similar proposal in 2000 out of fear the ".xxx" domain would force the body into content regulation.

ICM resubmitted its proposal in 2004, this time structuring it with a policy-setting organization to free ICANN of that task. But many board members worried that the language of the proposed contract was vague and could kick the task back to ICANN. The board rejected the 2004 proposal last May.

ICANN revived the proposal in January after ICM agreed to hire independent organizations to monitor porn sites' compliance with the new rules, which would be developed by a separate body called the International Foundation for Online Responsibility.

ICM revised it again a month later to clarify ICANN's enforcement abilities and to underscore the independence of the policy-making body.

Despite the vocal opposition, ICM Chairman Stuart Lawley said he preferred a quick vote, adding that the complaints come from "the same people saying the same things time and time again."

"ICM has done more to demonstrate the existence of a strong community than any other application the (ICANN) board has approved," Lawley said. "We have been singled out for special treatment. From the word ‘go,’ ... we were put in the slow lane."

If approved, ICM would be required to help develop mechanisms for promoting child safety and preventing child pornography, and porn sites using ".xxx" would have to participate in a self-rating system, labeling sites based on such criteria as the presence of nudity and whether it is in an artistic or educational context.

ICANN already has discussed the proposal during three, closed-door teleconference meetings this year. It indicated it would be ready to vote at a public meeting next Friday in Lisbon, Portugal.

But delays are possible if ICANN’s Governmental Advisory Committee raises last-minute objections when it meets next week. Last March, the committee called for stronger language in ICANN’s contract with ICM, and Lawley said those points have been addressed in the latest version of the contract.

ICM believes the domain would help the porn industry clean up its act, and Lawley said he has gone through great lengths to put its promises into writing.

"We are confident we have dotted every ‘i’ and crossed every ’t,’" he said, "and the contract deserves ratification."

MIT Puts All Its Courses Online

MIT last week revealed plans to make its entire 1,800-course curriculum available online by year’s end. The university has made the contents of some courses available on the Web since 2002. Some 1.5 million independent learners log on to the MIT OpenCourseWare site each month, and more than 120 other universities have established similar sites.

Who are MIT’s independent learners? One MIT calculation found that 17% are educators at other schools, 32% are students elsewhere, and 49% are self-learners. About 40% of MIT alumni use the site, says Steve Carson, the program’s director. "Usually they take courses they didn’t have time for while they were students here," he says. Courses are free; no course credit is granted.

Other learners come from outside the United States, from Antarctica to Darfur. The highest domestic traffic comes from leading high-tech states Massachusetts and California, Carson says.

The OCW Consortium of universities with similar offerings includes Harvard Law School, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Michigan State University, Tufts University, University of Notre Dame, University of California at Irvine, and Utah Valley State College.

=~=~=~=